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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KINSHASA 000745

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KPKO](#) [ASEC](#) [MOPS](#) [MARR](#) [CG](#)

SUBJECT: MBANDAKA ARMS DEPOT EXPLOSION: OFFICIALS CLAIM
SABOTAGE, BUT NOT LIKELY

REF: KINSHASA 680

Classified By: PolOff CBrown, reasons 1.4 b/d.

¶1. (C) Summary: Congolese officials have not determined the cause of the June 17 explosion at a military weapons depot in Equateur province, but claim it was the result of sabotage. Experts with the USG-funded NGO Mines Advisory Group (MAG) say it was more likely due to the accidental spread of a cooking fire. MAG officials said the damage could have been much worse, as most of the munitions were unfused and thus did not explode on impact. The danger posed by unexploded ordnance is under control, but it will take years to ensure clean-up of all ordnance in the municipal area. End summary.

¶2. (U) In the early morning hours of June 17, a fire broke out at a weapons depot at the FARDC's Camp Ngashi in Equateur province's capital of Mbandaka, causing tons of munitions and weapons to explode for several hours, propelling ordnance throughout a wide area of the city (reftel). Five people were killed and more than 50 injured as a result of the incident. A government delegation led by the interior and defense ministers inspected the area June 18, delivering supplies and USD 20,000 in emergency assistance. DSRSG Ross Mountain and the GDRC's humanitarian affairs minister also visited Mbandaka to review the damage.

¶3. (C) PolOff visited the provincial capital June 21-23 and spoke to government, military and NGO officials involved in the clean-up of the explosion. Congolese authorities said no cause has been established for the fire but insisted it was an act of sabotage. Governor Jose Makila told PolOff he suspected disgruntled soldiers deliberately set the fire to prevent the weapons from being shipped to eastern DRC. FARDC Regional Military Commander General Constant Ndima confirmed to us he had received orders to prepare some of the weapons for delivery to the East, and said his troops had packed up several tons just a few days before the fire.

¶4. (C) Ndima said he suspects sabotage, and claimed a FARDC lieutenant from eastern DRC complained to fellow officers that the weapons he was helping pack up would be used "to help kill (my) family." Neither Makila nor Ndima could confirm if this lieutenant had been arrested. Four soldiers who served as guards at the depot in the days before the fire are under arrest, as is the local commander of the naval force, whose personal guards have also been accused in the incident.

¶5. (C) Mark Belford, MAG's Technical Operations Manager for humanitarian activities in Equateur, discounted the conspiracy theories. He speculated the explosions were likely caused by a cooking or heating fire near the depot. He said

he has seen soldiers routinely use fires in the courtyard of the depot, despite orders from local FARDC commanders not to do so. Belford said it was easy to imagine one of these spreading to one of the storage sites.

¶16. (C) Belford told PolOff that the damage and loss of life could have been much worse. He said much of the ordnance did not have fuses, and therefore did not explode upon impact after being propelled from the depot by other explosions. Belford added that storage conditions at Camp Ngashi were known to be bad, but MAG officials had not been granted permission by the FARDC to conduct a full inspection there. Instead, MAG was able only to destroy about 1,800 weapons from the depot. Ndima estimated there were more than 100 tons of weapons and ammunition stored at the depot. Belford said safety precautions were virtually non-existent and as there were no water or fire extinguishers nearby to control any potential fires.

¶17. (C) PolOff's visit to Camp Ngashi revealed most the compound had been leveled. The building housing the weapons, adjacent to a military hospital and other administrative buildings, had been reduced to rubble. Several huge blast craters, indicating explosion of heavy munitions, were visible throughout the site. Remaining weapons and munitions, including several dozen grenade launchers, mortar tubes, rocket launchers, and anti-aircraft guns, were buried under mounds of debris. Little security was present at the site. PolOff observed some civilians present in the immediate vicinity of the former depot.

¶18. (SBU) Damage to the surrounding areas and buildings was noticeable but not extensive. The province's main

KINSHASA 00000745 002 OF 002

administrative building, which houses the governor's office and is located less than a mile away, had most of its windows blown out from percussion blasts. Ceiling tiles and plaster had fallen throughout its interior. Makila had appealed to the government to declare Mbandaka a disaster zone, but a tour of the city revealed little physical damage. Areas around the camp were mostly clear of visible debris, save for the few places where debris had fallen into a residential area and not yet been collected for disposal.

¶19. (SBU) Belford said clean-up of debris and unexploded ordnance throughout the city had largely been completed by June 21, and the situation was under control. He said his teams were focusing more on the immediate one-mile area surrounding the camp, where most munitions landed. Belford said, however, that MAG is awaiting permission from FARDC authorities to begin further clean-up, as the areas most affected are on military property. He added that removing ordnance from the entire city will likely take years; he explained that given the softness of the local soil, munitions burrowed deep into the ground on impact, and will likely not be found until unearthed by farmers.

¶10. (C) Comment: Conspiracy theories remain the preferred explanation of military and political officials, but the available evidence suggests otherwise. As the experts from MAG have noted, safety procedures were lax at the weapons depot and the FARDC has little capacity to store and maintain these weapons properly. The danger of unexploded ordnance will remain present as a complete clean-up of the city and immediate vicinity will take years. End comment.

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